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James Risch has been no caretaker governor during his short time in office

Jim Risch has been anything but a caretaker governor for seven months, and even though he is relinquishing the governor's office to Butch Otter, he won't be disappearing into the woodwork as a part-time lieutenant governor.

Risch has written his own \$2.7 billion state budget for next year, outlined his own spending initiatives and has endorsed a major tax cut on groceries.

He thinks the state should spend \$15 million boosting scholarships and salaries in Idaho's nursing schools, and he wants lawmakers to approve \$37 million in spending and bonds for two nursing school buildings.

None of this may matter when Otter takes over, of course. He will outline his own budget priorities in his State of the State speech Jan. 8, and he has already removed some appointees, notably prison director Vaughn Killeen and state drug czar Jim Tibbs.

Associates of Otter will point out, however, that he has a history of surrounding himself with competent people, and some changes are inevitable. As for Risch, his record of accomplishment since taking over for departing Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne seven months ago might be headed by passage of property tax relief in a one-day special session of the Legislature in August, though Democrats correctly observe there was an accompanying tax shift raising the sales tax from 5 cents to 6 cents.

Risch also won acceptance of Idaho's 9.3 million acres of federal roadless areas within national forests by U.S. Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns, which means the plan will move forward in the process of becoming a federal rule.

Environmentalists, fearing the worst in a Risch plan, instead found the document generally acceptable. Risch's plan, developed after statewide hearings conducted by county commissioners, limits development of 3.1 million acres — even more than the protections under the 2001 Clinton administration plan. Risch's plan also would allow temporary roads on another 5.5 million acres, but only to the extent already allowed under the Clinton officials.

Another 500,000 acres would be open to logging and road building — all told, an acceptable compromise. Otter, for his part, is not the same libertarian firebrand who, as a state representative in the 1970s, wanted to severely limit property taxes, opposed outlawing some drugs, and urged repeal of the law allowing local planning and zoning.

According to an Idaho Statesman interview, Otter now wants to expand community colleges, backs a requirement for more math and science for high schoolers, and has promised to convene task forces on energy,

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and on health care access and affordability. He will have to deal with big problems in prisons and higher education.

Will the two governors get along in 2007? Certainly, on most issues. Both are savvy politicians, and while Otter is the CEO, his lieutenant governor should be an invaluable ally.

And regardless of what happens from now on in the Statehouse, Risch can look back with some deserved satisfaction on his seven months in office.